Making the transition: How finding a good job is a risky business for military veterans in Northern Ireland

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Public significant Statement

This research brings important new insights about the transition from military to civilian life among Northern Ireland veterans; something which has been lacking in the literature until now. It highlights how concern for personal safety can be a barrier to finding meaningful work, and ensuring their longer term health and well-being.

Data Accessibility Statement: The data is held in a secure repository at Queens University Belfast Psychology Department and a Supplementary Data File containing some further data may be made available. Interested researchers should initially contact Professor Cherie Armour, at Queens University, Belfast.

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Abstract

Veterans transitioning from the military to civilian life may encounter difficulties in different domains of functioning. Most research in this area comes from the US and Israel, with veterans in Northern Ireland (NI) in the United Kingdom, remaining an understudied population. This qualitative study aimed to examine the nature of transition experiences of NI veterans by analysing responses (N =252) to an open-ended question related to the transition process, in a self-report survey. Thematic analysis highlighted both positive and negative experiences across high level themes. These were related to (1a) how good the military life had been, (1b) the transition had been easy for some veterans, and (1c) the skills gained in the military have been valuable; (2) it was hard to adjust to civilian life/still adjusting; (3) negative employment experiences; (4) lack of trust; (5) transitioning is hard in NI; and (6) inadequate support, post-service. The findings highlight that NI veterans share some of the same challenges as other veterans, however the challenges in NI are compounded by ongoing security concerns and political tensions, which means living under the radar is a reality for many, making finding meaningful work and community integration difficult. The findings indicate that preparation for civilian life and the acculturation process needs to start many months before discharge. Perhaps more crucially, regiments should work closely with and support civilian employers to equip them to recognise and value the skills ex-Services veterans can offer, and find a good fit for their skills within their organisations.

Key words: Military veterans; Northern Ireland; Transition; Employment; Security; Psychological Well-being.

Introduction

Transition from the military to civilian life is a relatively trouble free experience for many who have served in the Armed Forces. However, it can be a daunting and stressful process for a proportion of service leavers. Leaving behind the structure of military existence, military culture, and comradeship to navigate a civilian life in of itself, poses numerous challenges. Despite the fact that the majority of service leavers do not leave with physical injuries or mental health problems, many will have functioning issues that make reintegration difficult. In a 2008 survey conducted with a representative sample of 754 US Iraq/Afghanistan combat veterans (Sayer, Noorbaloochi, Frazier, Carlson,Gravely & Murdoch, 2010), it was found that despite already receiving Veteran Health Administration (VA) medical care, 96% of veterans expressed interest in receiving support in other domains of reintegration into civilian life.

Approximately half of the UK veteran population are over 75 years of age (MoD, 2019) and while mental health problems do not present during or soon after transition, it has been found that many veterans will begin to re-visit and process events from their combat experiences which has been called Later-Adulthood Trauma Reengagement (LATR) and social and emotional support may prove invaluable (Marinia, Fioria, Wilmoth, Kaiser, & Martiree (2019). For those military personnel of working age, adjusting to civilian working practices and culture can be hard (e.g. Ahern, Worthen, Masters, Lippman, & Ozer, 2015; Redmond, Wilcox, Campbell, Kim, Finney, & Barr, 2015). The most frequently reported needs were information on civilian life skills, such as; benefits, schooling, employment and job training. Additionally, between 25% - 56% of veterans reported experiencing ‘some’ to ‘extreme’ difficulty in several domains of functioning, including productivity, community involvement, social functioning and self-care (Sayer et al., 2010). Numerous studies have

reported that physical and mental health problems can make it more difficult for veterans finding work as they face difficulties related to interpersonal functioning, community involvement, employment, and some may become homeless (Karstoft, Armour, Andersen, Bertelsen, & Madsen, 2015; Kukla, Rattray, & Salyers, 2015; Sayer, Carlson, & Frazier, 2014). Indeed, as argued by Kukla et al., (2015), *"reintegration after leaving the military involves multiple transitions that must be managed simultaneously" (p.487).*

The social needs of transitioning military personnel are therefore of increasing interest to the research community and their growing importance is reflected in the creation of a Well-Being Inventory of Veteran Transitions (Vogt, Tyrell, Bramande, Taverna, et al., 2020). The emphasis here is placed not just on the importance of financial, mental and physical health on well-being, but also on social satisfaction, gained through community integration and acceptance, and finding meaningful employment. A study applying the inventory to US veterans in their first year of transition, found concerns about a range of chronic health conditions, but also that they were experiencing good vocational and social well-being (Vogt, Taverna, Nillni, Booth, Perkins, & Copeland, 2020).

The extant literature on veterans' transitioning has focused on health, particularly mental health, and has come predominantly from the US (e.g. Kukla et al., 2015; Redmond, et al., 2015; Sayer et al., 2010), and also Israel (e.g. Tsur, Stein, Levin, Seigal & Solomon, 2019). In some ways, the Israeli veteran experience is similar to NI veteran experiences in that Israelis live very close, or within their theatre of war. But where they differ is that Israeli-Palestinian conflict overtly continues. Also military service is mandatory in Israel, and many are called to serve a number of times up to the age of 45 (Lander, Huss & Harel-Sharev, 2019). What perhaps makes them unique, is that they move in and out of civilian and military life over many years, and have to manage dual identities (Lander, et al., 2019).

In recent years, the multi-faceted nature of veterans' transition difficulties has received increasing attention in the United Kingdom. Recent insights include a UK study which revealed lower-ranked personnel may need particular help with finding employment (Burdett, Fear, MacManus, Wessely, & Rona, et al., 2019) and early service leavers may be in more need of mental health support (Buckman, Forbes, Clayton, Jones, Jones, et al., 2019). Additional employment-focused support to service leavers may be particularly useful to lower-ranked personnel and those leaving in an unplanned way. According to the Royal British Legion Household Survey (2014) there are 2.8 million people within the ex-Service community in the UK, and the majority live in England, and 64% are over 65 years of age. In the 2018/19 financial year alone, 14,633 individuals left the UK Regular Forces (Dempsey, 2019), some of whom chose to settle in NI (exact number is unknown). While a number of studies about UK veterans continue to emerge in recent years (e.g. Engelbrecht, Burdett, Silva, Bhui, & Jones, 2019; Iverson, Fear, Simonoff, Hull, Horn, et al., 2007; Williamson, Greenberg, & Murphy, 2019), the majority of samples are drawn from England, or are reported as UK participants. Consequently, little is understood about how health and well-being may differ across the four nations (Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland). Research evidence is slowly growing and insights from Murphy, Ross, Busuttil, Greenberg and Armour (2019) about UK veteran mental health, found that NI help-seeking veterans represented 22% of their UK sample, despite NI veterans representing a small proportion of the veteran population of the UK, suggesting higher need. Also, Ashwick and Murphy (2017) discovered that Northern Irish veterans tended to be older, in poorer physical health and took longer to seek help, compared to veterans from the other three nations. We know from a study by Brewin Andrews and Hejdenberg (2012) that psychological problems and PTSD were found to still be present 10 years after the original diagnosis among UK war pensioners.

Because of the paucity of research into the experiences of NI veterans compared to the rest of the UK, the Forces in Mind Trust funded a four-year programme of research into the health and well-being of NI veterans which has resulted so far in detailed initial scoping work and reports. These reports included a scoping review of their current and future needs (Armour, Waterhouse-Bradley, Walker, Hall, & Ross, 2017b); the existing support services available (Armour, Waterhouse-Bradley, Walker, & Ross, 2017) and public attitudes to NI veterans (Armour, Ross, McLafferty, & Hall, 2018). An Armed Forces Continuous Attitude Survey (Ministry of Defence (MOD), 2017) had reported that only 41% of Service personnel felt they were valued by society. The Public Attitudes towards NI veterans (Armour et al., 2018) was deemed particularly important, because there was a perception that public attitudes towards ex-Service veterans in NI may be very low, due because of the legacy of the Northern Ireland Conflict. This conflict resulted in the deployment of the UK Armed Forces (Operation Banner: 1969–2007). During Operation Banner, more than 300,000 soldiers served in Northern Ireland. And at the height of the Troubles in the 1970s, about 21,000 British troops were deployed, most of them coming from regiments from mainland UK. Home Service personnel formed The Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) in 1970 and remained until 1992. During the conflict, attempts by Republican paramilitary organisations to reunite Ireland, involved attacks on the security forces, and bombings of civilians. But it also resulted in many sectarian killings, and as a consequence, over 3500 people lost their lives. However, the Good Friday Agreement played a significant role in a move towards peace, with the agreement essentially predicated upon the condition that Ireland would only be reunited if the majority of the people in Ireland consented to it. It was not until 2005 that a ceasefire and disarmament took place, and Operation Banner ended in 2007. Many military personnel from GB regiments chose to return to NI, and live in their former operational theatre.

Key findings about public attitudes collected in the NILT Survey (Armour, et al., 2018) revealed that 13% of Catholic communities had a high or very high opinion of the Armed Forces today, compared to 71% of Protestants. When asked about the Armed Forces who had served in NI, 2% of Protestants and 34% of Catholics indicated that they felt more negatively about the members of the UK Armed Forces who served in NI. When asked how they would feel if someone from the Armed Forces moving next door to them, 30% of Catholics indicated that they would be uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the situation, compared 15% of protestants.

A great deal of progress being made since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This includes the formation of a power-sharing legislative assembly that has devolved government responsibilities. The two largest parties with equal representation on the Assembly are the DUP (Unionist) party and Sinn Féin (Nationalist) party. However, some argue, that the conflict is not over (Cochrane 2013), because significant political and religious divides still exist and outbreaks of violence, acts of intimidations and punishment shootings continue, carried out by dissident paramilitary organisations. For example, an attack in 2010 on British soldiers by the Real Irish Republican Army (IRA), outside an army barracks left two soldiers dead and two injured. A dissident republican letter bomb exploded in 2015 inside another army barracks in NI. It is perhaps understandable then that NI ex-service veterans have concerns for their own personal safety. Adding to this is the ongoing and prolonged investigation of thousands of unsolved deaths that took place during the Troubles, which has not excluded members of the British Armed Forces, many of whom are now aged in their 60's and 70's. The Legacy Investigations Branch (2014) exists as part of the 2014 Stormont House Agreement (House of commons 2020). There is ongoing concern about the re-investigation of cases that had been presumed concluded, the use of witness statements that may be over 40 years old and a disproportionate focus on actions of armed forces. But an amnesty for all

those involved in the Troubles is not an option, as it is strongly resisted by both Unionist and Nationalist parties in NI.

Feeling under threat can affect psychological well-being (Mott, Graham, & Teng, 2012; Schmid & Muldoon, 2013), and worryingly may prevent those in need from seeking help (Armour, et al., 2017b). Another effect of the current political climate is being unable to freely and safely take part commemorative events to recognise military personnel who have served and lost their lives in military conflicts. Being an ex-service veteran remains politicised and stigmatised in NI and consequently military commemorative events, rather than being opportunities to bring people together, are contested and opposed by Nationalist communities who associate the military with Unionism, and consequently Catholic communities do not identify or participate in them, at least not openly (Robinson, 2010). The scoping study of support services for in NI (Armour, et al., 2017) revealed that an infrastructure of support exists for ex-Service veterans in NI which are designed around the specific needs, and 19 veteran-oriented local and national voluntary and community organisations existed (Armour et al., 2017) compared to 1,818 in England and Wales (Pozo & Walker, 2014). NI veterans can access NHS services and employment and housing agencies available to all citizens in NI. But existing stakeholders have attested to the reality that they mainly rely on informal relationships networks for referrals, as trust issues prevent some veterans from coming forward to access services such as housing and mental health (Armour et al., 2017b).

Making the transition from military to civilian life in NI has particular challenges, but yet very little is published about the extent to which NI veterans make the transition successfully, and currently there is a gap in the literature on the topic. The UK veteran population is increasing (The Royal British Legion, 2014) and so in order to begin to establish

198 an evidence base, this current study utilised a qualitative approach to examine the NI veterans'
199 experiences of their transition from the military to civilian life.

200 **Methods**

201 The current paper is part of a larger program of research, entitled the Northern Ireland
202 Veterans' Health and Wellbeing Study (2014-2020). As part of this study, researchers
203 conducted a self-report survey examining the psychological wellbeing of NI veterans.
204 Participants were recruited through social media, newspaper advertising, local charities and
205 veteran organisations. The survey was available online and in pen-and-paper format and
206 consisted of a large set of standardized measures, some of which were adapted to the local
207 context, and a series of open-ended questions. Participation was open to anyone who self-
208 identified as a veteran of the UK Armed Forces, currently living in NI. A 'veteran' was
209 defined as anyone who served in any branch of the UK regular or reserve Armed Forces and
210 who no longer serves, or anyone who served in the regular Armed Forces and is now serving
211 with the reserves (for the purposes of this study, current reservists were excluded). The survey
212 went live in December 2017 and data collection finished in July 2019. Ethical approval for
213 the study was granted by Ulster University's Research Ethics Committee.

214 The current study utilised participants' responses to the question "*Do you have any*
215 *comments about your transition from the military to civilian life?*" The open-ended nature of
216 the question allowed respondents to answer with no prompts, or any restrictions placed upon
217 the length of their response. By providing no prompts about the type of transition experiences
218 (e.g., health-related, employment-related), respondents were free to talk about what they
219 considered to be the most salient issues for them. It also provided them with the opportunity
220 to use their own words to describe transition experiences.

221 *Insert Table 1 here*

Table 1 shows the age and gender breakdown of participants, and 40% of participants were under 55 years old, 40% were aged over 55 years, and 20% were over 65 years old. Of the 298 who entered data, a total of 252 participants responded to the question about the transition experience. Of these, one hundred and twenty-six participants had served exclusively in the regular Armed Forces, fourteen served exclusively in the reserves, and one hundred and twelve served time in both. The mean length of time since leaving the military for the whole sample, including reserves, was 21 years (between 1-59 years). The sample was divided into cohorts, based on length of time that has passed since making the transition (see Table 2). Approximately 10% of the responses were unrelated to a transition experience and are labelled as 'other' in Figure 1.

Insert Table 2 here

In our sample, 49% of participants reported that they had suffered a physical injury during their service and 35% were given a mental health diagnosis since discharge.

Analysis

Insert Figure One here

An inductive approach was used by the researchers analysing the data (DR and JR), who adopted an interpretative orientation, as the views expressed were the personal experiences of the veterans. This allowed for an in-depth analysis of experiences and shared meanings. Each researcher independently identified and extracted six high level themes and sub-themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After face to face meetings to discuss the codes, some adjustments followed. Each researcher then checked the sub-codes of the other researcher. This iterative process of cross-checking continued, and the researchers finally reached a high level of consensus on the sub-coding. It had been over 30 years for a number of veterans since they had left military service. Because of this, a content frequency analysis took place to provide information that would allow for comparisons to be made and draw out any

contrasting features between the five Transition Groups. Results are presented in Figure 1. Please note that Group 4 and Group 5 had smaller numbers and their responses represent 22% of the data presented in Figure 1.

Results

Content Frequency Analysis

A number of responses were very short or were unrelated to the transition experience itself, consequently they were combined and presented in Figure 1 under 'Other'. Very similar themes emerged in every group, and the conclusion from this, is that the transition experience is quite consistent in terms of nature of the problems faced, regardless of when they transitioned, and whether it had been during, or after the Troubles. Those who had transitioned between 31-40 years ago (Group 4) and over 40 years ago (Group 5) gave more reports that military life had been satisfying and enjoyable, and felt they had acquired valuable skills that helped them in civilian life. Group 4 reported the same difficulties as Group 1 and Group 2; hard adjusting to civilian life, they experienced a lack of support post transition; struggled with anxieties such as feelings of being lost and feeling abandoned, and find it hard to trust civilians. Specific references were made to the security threats that exist within Northern Ireland. Group 2 stands out a little more from the other groups in terms of finding the adjustment to civilian life hard, and civilian working practices and attitudes.

In-depth qualitative analysis

Theme One (a): Military life and the transition was positive for some, but is missed.

Making the move from military to civilian life was relatively easy for some respondents due, in part, to feeling equipped for the transition, and the fact that their standard of living did not diminish once they entered civilian life.

> *"I found the transition fairly easy, I was happily married with two young children and had my own home, I got a good job with similar salary to my armed forces*

final salary. My armed forces managerial abilities certainly helped when dealing with a large workforce" [M71, Army Nco].

"My transition from military life was very smooth. I think I am an exception as I was ready for civilian life" [M48, Army Nco].

Nostalgic reflections of the military career presented in some of the narratives, with some veterans saying how they particularly missed the social camaraderie of the military. In some cases, this made the acculturation to civilian life particularly difficult, a phenomenon referred to elsewhere as "reverse culture shock" (Koenig, 2015).

"Making civilian friends is difficult. Staying in touch with friends from the army has become very important to me as I feel closest to them than any civilian, even the partners I have had. Most of my army friends live in England and I often think I should move back over there to be close to them, sometimes I feel empty without them, when going through tough times" [M29, Army other rank].

"The loss of social cohesion with similar minded individuals has been difficult. In particular, my wife and I miss the cohesion of mess life and the friendship associated with this" [M54, Army officer].

Theme One (b): Life and employment skills gained from military have been valuable in the civilian life.

A number of NI veterans were able to secure jobs for which they were a good fit, mainly because of their military training. A facet of military culture and life that appeared consistently in the narratives was that of structure and order, a consistent theme found in other transition research (Black & Papile, 2010). There was an appreciation of the fact that military service had made a significant contribution to supporting and enhancing their personal development.

"Joining the service as a boy helped me to become more independent. It supplied me with a trade and training, so that on my end of service I was able to get a good job and be able to socialise without problems" [M81, Army officer].

"Using the skills you have learned and used in your military career particularly leadership, organisational and social helped me make a very smooth transition to civilian life" [M60, Royal Navy 4].

While some had to seek work overseas, these roles nevertheless enabled them to make use of their management skills and they felt their disciplined attitude towards work gained during their military service was valued.

> *"I was lucky in that shortly after leaving the Army, a position came up to which I was well suited; my military training was in many aspects of security and intelligence, and the role was in (African country) I was born in (African region) and speak (language), and the role was as security manager at (a place of work). My resettlement courses involved Health and Safety and all of the briefings on CV writing, interviews etc. These all contributed to a successful series of roles over the next 20 years. I was happy with the resettlement process" [M65, Army officer].*

> *"I found the transition fairly easy, I was happily married with two young children and had my own home, I got a good job with similar salary to my armed forces final salary. My armed forces managerial abilities certainly helped when dealing with a large workforce" [M71, Army Nco].*

Theme One (c): The military work ethic and culture are important and remain after service.

Military standards were considered to be influential in building character, strong morals and team spirit, and particularly suited for those who liked order and discipline.

> *"Military life had given me confidence, self-discipline and an ability to work/live closely with others. It has also given me a humour that had been beneficial to all aspects of my life" [M49, Navy Nco].*

> *"My military service was a great experience. There was lots of learning and whilst I learnt to build on my independence, at the same time I learnt about the importance of teamwork. Whilst I was in service that was all good but post service, the military needs to do more, especially here in Northern Ireland" [M49, Army officer].*

Theme Two: Hard to adjust to civilian life/still adjusting.

The military provides a working environment which functions as a self-contained community, where healthcare, housing, food needs etc. are all effectively taken care of, and it provides a protected, supportive environment which lasts for many years. Some assumptions in serving personnel may therefore exist about the relative ease with which a new career may be found in civilian life, and for those who do not prepare, transition from a military to a civilian career is far from easy (Redmond et al., 2015).

"I miss my friends from the army and the lifestyle and family feeling I had with them wasn't prepared mentally and practically i.e. like paying bills etc. to go into civvie street" [M54, Army officer].

"I found the transition difficult due to joining the army at 16, straight from school, and being institutionalised for 25 years. Although now having been away from the army for 6 years I feel that I am coping better with the change. I suppose trying to find my way in a world that was very alien to me with a different structure, mind-set and outlook the most difficult" [M47, Army officer].

Theme Three: Negative employment experiences result from a divergence between military and civilian work culture.

While military standards, discipline and team spirit were valued by ex-Service veterans, and were an asset with regards to some employment opportunities, their absence in a civilian working context conversely resulted in some describing re-entry into civilian employment straight out of services as a shock, often because of the divergence between the two cultures. This unpreparedness could be due in part to the extent to which some military personnel had totally immersed themselves in military culture, internalising and adopting military values, such as selfless service, honour and duty - values perceived by some veterans to be lacking in civilian working environments (Ahern et al., 2015; Redmond et al., 2015). They also struggled to find meaningful employment and felt it was because they were ex-forces.

"It has been the hardest challenge adjusting to civilian life. Work has been the most difficult as civilians don't have the "get the job done attitude". They put obstacles in place which are pointless" [M35, Army Nco].

"The first year after leaving the Service was hard. I found that people in Civvie Street tend to fight each other and teamwork seemed non-existent. Speaking to other vets over the years I have found they had found the first 6-12 months the hardest. My first 5 years were spent unemployed as I couldn't get a job. Most of the time it was due to being ex-forces [M53, RAF Nco].

"I found it extremely difficult to adjust to Civvie Street after I left even finding employment no one wanted you. They would say you are a security risk to my business, even today I will not speak of my time in the military only with those who I know have served. Not even with my family. Civvies don't understand never will" [M64, Army other].

In Canada, veterans have reported that the most important component of successful transition for them was whether or not they found satisfying work (Black & Papile, 2010). There are diverse and wide ranging potential job roles that could be offered to veterans. While some veterans found work because they were able to make good use of their management skills, mechanical skills or medical training, a lack of support for veterans with less obvious skills was mentioned, support that could help them translate these skills into something they could sell to civilian employers (Zogas, 2017). In NI, compared to Great Britain (GB; England, Wales, Scotland), respondents highlighted a particular struggle with having their skills and experience recognised and valued by recruitment agencies, and there were reports of some veterans ending up in less skilled professions as a result.

> *"I'm from England and joined an English regiment and still have contact with them. I was very jealous of how they could go for a job interview and they could talk about their experiences from the army. Living in Northern Ireland you can't, and found I had very little options as to what jobs I wanted to go to. Always first question asked so what was your last job. Or previous work. Can't say nothing for the last 20 odd years. When you find a job it's then hard to then make friends and socialise with them, as you have to work out their background" [M52, Army Nco].*

Theme Four: Lack of trust is a barrier to developing social relationships with civilians

Supportive social relationships are important for psychological wellbeing and can even be protective against adverse mental health outcomes in military veterans (McLafferty, Ross, Waterhouse-Bradley, & Armour, 2019; Vogt et al., 2019). Several respondents talked about their lack of trust in non-military individuals, particularly because of security concerns. As a result, many choose to socialize only with other veterans, which could lead to feelings of isolation within their communities.

> *"My transition was smooth as I had a good job working abroad when I left, which ended 3 years ago. Coming back to Northern Ireland to live was hard for me and the job situation and people's attitude towards veterans. I am referring to recruitment agencies who have a negative impression of ex-military personnel no matter how well qualified or educated you may be. Compared to the mainland, we are light years behind. My peers had no trouble finding well paid and suitable work on the mainland…there are specific ex-military recruiting agencies, free courses offered to veterans, the list goes on" [M48, Army Nco].*

"In NI, once you leave you're on your own and the support network is not there. A lot of soldiers over here do struggle with the employment challenge and end up with the lower end of the scale jobs such as driving, warehouse work, security officers, which in my opinion is ridiculous" [M48, Army Nco].

"As I try to fit in with civilians it's difficult, they share none of my experiences… My main social group is with my branch regimental associations. We have regular dinners usually on military bases in NI, or in very safe venues in predominately protestant areas of NI. In NI to admit to your neighbours that you were in the Armed forces is a big personal security issue" [M62, Army other rank].

"You quite often feel as if you are living a lie because of the Northern Ireland situation you keep yourself to yourself, find it extremely difficult to put you trust in anyone. You end up being socially quite isolated" [F56, Royal Navy other].

Theme Five: Transitioning in NI is particularly hard.

In addition to the security threats, there are also differences between mainland GB and NI in terms of accessing statutory services and support to find housing and employment.

"Once you leave the Armed Forces you are on your own with very little or no help from any government agency. The military Covenant is only a sound bite for politicians who I have no trust in, whatsoever. The only trust is in your old comrades' associations" [M72, Army Nco].

I'm not sure if it is the same elsewhere in the UK, but once out of the army and home in NI, I have felt isolated and abandoned. There are no services here, and if they are they are not well advertised or communicated. NI universities don't welcome elcas etc., so access to education is weaker" [M27, Army Nco].

Theme Six (a): Support with transition was inadequate.

A lack of support from the military during and after transition featured consistently in the narratives and resonated with the experiences of US veterans (Keeling, Ozuna, Kintzle, & Castro, 2018), particularly those needing help with housing, finances and finding work etc. Enlisting in the military involves much more than starting a new job, it entails adopting a lifestyle, a set of values, and making a strong moral commitment to one's country (Pohl, Bertrand, & Ergen, 2016). The new recruit then becomes part of a tightknit cohesive unit,

protected and supported by their comrades. Many respondents reported that on leaving the military, they felt immediately cut off and unsupported.

> *"It was difficult there was no support in settling and finding work and accommodation. You felt like they had abandoned you. Missed the army way of life and friends" [M54, Army Nco].*

> *"At the time I left, I felt there was little and no support for the transition from military to civilian life. I did my resettlement course and that was it, no advice for career or where to go if things got tough, I found myself isolated and couldn't talk to family as I had come from a war zone in Bosnia to nothing happening in my life" [M55, Army Nco].*

Often veterans leave the military with a large financial settlement and find themselves ill-equipped to manage their finances, and this has sometimes resulted in poor decision making.

> *"The hardest problem I have had to deal with all relates to Finance. I left the Army with a large sum of money from redundancy. I had little help or assistance, I found a lot of people came out of the woodwork to advise myself and family, however it was for their benefit and not mine. The investments and decisions I made were poor, this caused me to always look back with regrets and negativity" [M43, Army Nco].*

The unhappiness expressed was not only about the general lack of support with resettlement, but also significant concerns about personal safety, and lack of protection featured as many (79% of our sample where deployed to NI) continue to live in their former operational theatre (Patterson, 2008).

Theme Six (b) Negative emotions feeling abandoned, lost and lonely.

The salient threats and lack of support left some feeling particularly anxious and angry towards the military. Their discourse revealed feelings of hurt, and abandonment. Isolation and mental health problems can increase risk of suicide among veterans, something which is an increasing concern worldwide (Lusk, Brenner, Betthauser, Terrio, & Scher, 2015; Pease, Billera, & Gerard, 2016).

> *"It was a total disaster own my own since I was 15. I knew nothing about Civvie Street, tax, pay etc. I felt isolated and scared" [M61, Navy Nco].*

"Major trauma, like being a puppet with the strings cut. Total abandonment" [M51, Army Nco].

"I live in NI and like most veterans we feel abandoned. No consideration was ever given to us in the many agreements that took place. Last couple of years have been extremely trying. TV, radio, papers never leave it alone. Legacy inquiries and soldier arrests have the veteran community agitated in NI. We here in NI did not leave like others did, yet we are the veterans with the least" [F51, Army Nco].

Discussion

This paper presents the results of research into the experiences of transitioning from military to civilian life among NI veterans, using information collected via a self-report survey. A qualitative analysis and a content analysis provides an interpretation of how veterans were making sense and feeling about their experiences, and from this, a number of consistent themes were formulated. The content frequency analysis (Figure 1) enabled us to determine the degree to which each theme featured in the narratives of the five Transition Groups. Themes that best characterise our findings are; military life had been satisfying, and the military work culture, the camaraderie, and character-building nature of their experiences had been valuable, but the military life was missed (Theme One (a), One (b), and One (c)). These narratives sharply contrasted with other themes that also emerged about how hard it had been to adjust from being military personnel to a civilian, and how they some were still struggling (Theme Two). The narratives also included talk of negative employment experiences, because of a divergence between military and civilian work culture (Theme Three); but also a lack of trust pervades and is a barrier to developing social and work relationships with civilians (Theme Four). The experience of transitioning in Northern Ireland seemed to offer particular challenges because of political tensions and security concerns making some reluctant to approach services for help, and also differences exist between NI and GB in how military veterans could access services such as employment and housing agencies (Theme Five). Theme six focused on the belief that support services for transition

had been inadequate (6a); and some expressed negative emotions (b), with the exception of Group 5 (Group 5 made up 8% of the sample).

On balance, narratives about negative experience featured more predominantly in the discourse compared with positive and nostalgic reflections on military service. Respondents described difficulties adjusting to civilian life made more challenging by transitioning in NI, and feeling unsupported during and after the transition from the military. What is important to emphasise at this this point, is that the main survey had attracted over 1300 respondents and of these approximately 252 (19%) gave an answer to the question regarding transition. We can only assume that transition for the remaining 80% was problem free. These findings are not dissimilar to those reported by Morin (2011), who found that 72% of US veterans recounted finding it easy to make the adjustment to life as a civilian and around 27% found the transition difficult. Being on active duty can be exciting and stimulating for some personnel – a phenomenon referred to as 'combat rush' (Betthauser, Allen, Grigsby, & Brenner, 2017). At the same time, however, there are unfortunate negative consequences to combat exposure, such as traumatic brain injury (Turgoose & Murphy, 2018), posttraumatic stress disorder (Richardson, Frueh, & Acierno, 2010), depression (Bonde Utzon-Frank, Bertelsen, Borritz, & Eller, 2016) and others. Also at least one third of our sample had received a mental health diagnosis since discharge and could be particularly vulnerable and in need of support. We know that many veterans will re-visit traumatic combat experiences many years after the event, a phenomenon described as Later-Adulthood Trauma Reengagement (LATR) (Marinia, et al., 2019). However, the ongoing security situation in NI means those most in need, may in fact be the ones *least* likely to come forward for support.

Our analysis also revealed that leaving the military was very stressful for some, as their service had ended abruptly, and it felt like a shock (Redmond et al., 2015). In fact, Borus (1975) was one of the first to write about the notion of shock among homecoming Vietnam

veterans. He provided one explanation as to why transition can be particularly difficult for some service leavers and this is because they lacked the coping mechanisms needed to navigate the significant change in their lives, and they struggled. This could also be true for veterans who had served in conflicts, but unlike in the US, NI veterans transition in an environment where the threat to life is still tangible, and those without coping mechanisms, they could find it particularly stressful, heightening any sense of abandonment and injustice experienced.

Ensuring a safe environment within which to find satisfying employment, especially those suffering from trauma related injuries, should be part of their treatment pathway (Murphy, Ashwick, Palmer & Busuttil, 2019). In the case of NI veterans, Murphy et al. (2019) reported finding that a higher proportion of their sample of help-seeking veterans with mental health problems were from NI, and they tended to be younger. Our content analysis revealed that Transition Group One (transitioned in last 10 years) who are the youngest group, and possibly coming from the Iraq or Afghanistan conflict, spoke most about difficulties transitioning into NI. Together these findings tentatively suggest that the younger veterans should be a particular focus for ex-service support organisations.

To re-enter civilian life with a range of health problems is challenging enough, but an added challenge in NI is the lack of mental health support and trauma services for both NI veterans and civilians. This is an ongoing issue and can in part, be explained by the historical dearth in a statutory support infrastructure for victims of trauma in NI. In Israel, where the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is continuing and hostile attacks occur on home soil, it was recognised in the early 90's that missile attacks were traumatising civilians as well as the military, and they began to build trauma centres (Bleich, Dycian, Koslowsky, Solomon, & Wiener, 1992). As a result, Israeli military and civilians have access to high quality trauma services, leading to increased resilience against continued threats to life. NI has been lacking

in a trauma service infrastructure until very recently, and while services are beginning to grow, their absence has been felt by not just NI civilians, but also the veterans living in the region. Unlike the US, which invests heavily into the VA service provision, NI veterans must rely upon mainstream healthcare services when they leave the military. This complete lack of infrastructure has meant the whole population of NI has historically had limited trauma specialist services available to them (Wave Trauma Centre, 2012). Furthermore, in other parts of the UK such as England, should a veteran demonstrate they have a clinical need resulting from military service, that is equal to the needs of other civilians on an NHS waiting list, they are entitled to priority access to NHS care. This provision is not afforded to NI veterans, due to continued inconsistencies in equality law between Great Britain and Northern Ireland (Equality Act 2010) and lack of support from Nationalist political parties and refusal to embrace the principles of the Armed Forces covenant in NI and offer veterans the support they need. As a consequence, strong attitudes pervade discussions between Nationalist and Unionist parties about any proposals for military veterans to get preferential treatment from other victims of the Troubles.

Feelings expressed about the lack of trust, as well as a perceived lack of support services for NI veterans after discharge, were particularly salient in the discourse suggesting those suffering from pre-existing problems resulting from traumatic combat experiences, could be having their symptoms magnified by feeling unsupported by government as well as the undercurrents of threats to life from dissident republicans (Patterson, 2008). There are generally positive attitudes in NI overall, towards the Armed Forces and for the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant (AFC; Armour, et al 2018), however the AFC (Ministry of Defence [MOD], 2014) has not been adopted in eight out of the 11 Local authorities in NI and the Public Attitudes Survey completed in 2018 (NILT) also discovered that negative attitudes persist among Nationalist communities in NI towards the Armed forces (Armour et

al., 2018). As a consequence, ex-Service veterans feel that seeking out employment in specific parts of the province is unsafe for them.

Another important finding of this research is that a sizeable number of veterans felt very unsupported generally, and this goes beyond dissatisfaction to stronger feelings of anger and hurt. It is possible to begin to understand these emotions if we adopt a social exchange perspective (Blau, 1964). Robinson and Rosseau (1994) would explain this hurt and anger as an expression of a strong sense of injustice felt by veterans in NI. These feelings of injustice occur when one party in a psychological contract perceives the other to "have failed to fulfil promised obligation(s)'' (p.247). Military personnel enter into a social contract when they sign up for Armed Forces. At this time, there is an implicit understanding that the degree of commitment, loyalty, and sacrifice they give while serving their country will be reciprocated by the MOD, as part of this social contract. A breach in such a contract would be felt very deeply.

Finding satisfying employment is a key aspect of successful transition (Keeling et al., 2018), and this has been reported by other researchers in this field (e.g. Ashcroft, 2012; Ahern Worthen, Masters, Lippman, & Ozer, 2015). In UK, the ex-Service community (i.e., veterans and their adult and child dependants) who are of working age (16-64) are less likely to be employed and more likely to be economically inactive and unemployed compared to the UK general population of the same age (The Royal British Legion, 2014). Our data contained only a few reports of struggles with finances, and while a study by Binks and Cambridge (2018) reported that veterans struggled to obtain financial loans and credit agreements, and struggle with finding a new civilian identity, financial problems at least, were not an issue for the majority of our sample.

At present in NI, there are a number of organisations which provide employment support to NI veterans and signpost trusted contacts within employment agencies (Armour et

al., 2017). However, given the findings of this research, much more investment is advised both in the content and quality of this support. What could also help would be a change to how transition is conceptualised, so that it is not something that simply begins post discharge but much earlier, and deemed a significant life course transition. Further research could help to understand what additional support may help NI veterans find satisfying employment in NI, in recognition that it is a vital component of the transition process and important for social and financial well-being (Proyer, Annen, Eggimann, Schneider, & Ruch, 2012; Vogt et al., 2019). Its importance therefore, should not be underestimated.

If we look at employment in more detail, there appears to be three main issues to be addressed. The first is the difficulties in accepting the civilian work culture, which can be problematic if one is seeking to find a profession which shares the same values, such as discipline, structure and team work. These are similar experiences to veterans in other countries; Ahern et al. (2015) found military veterans struggled to find suitable roles in civilian life and could feel alienated and disconnected from civilians, and as a result, could experience identity conflict (Smith & True, 2014). Using data from a nationally representative US household survey, Schulker (2017) found that US veterans tend to work in areas that align with their technical military functions. Our findings indicate that some NI veterans have also struggled with civilian work culture, and this points to the need for job roles in organisations that share a similar ethos of structure, discipline and team work, as this would increase job satisfaction in civilian employment. It is clear that military culture can remain a crucial part of a veteran's sense of identity, and cannot be switched off suddenly. This speaks to the importance of advance career planning and advice to find a good person-environment fit in those preparing to leave the Armed Forces (Wilson-Smith & Corr, 2019). Moreover, there could be value in exploring what lessons could be learned from Israeli Military, where service personnel have to manage civilian and military roles and identities interchangeably (Lander,

et al., 2019). Career counselling services could be particularly beneficial as they could begin to reverse the military de-acculturation process (Westwood, Black, & McLean, 2002; Zogas, 2017). As well as this, programmes aimed at educating potential employers about the benefits of having employees with military training and experience are needed (SSAFA, 2018).

The second issue is that employment agencies do not advertise ex-Armed Forces specific job vacancies in NI. As a consequence, recruitment consultants will have little experience and knowledge about the skills that military training can bring to the business world (The Telegraph, 2019). Any jobs that are advertised online with ex-service personnel in mind will be located in GB and not NI. The third issue is that of security; as some veterans are very reluctant to reveal their previous employment history to staff in NI job centres and recruitment agencies. In the veteran well-being study conducted by Vogt et al., (2019) newly separated US veterans experienced high vocational and social well-being as they reintegrated into civilian life, but this is not the experience for a number of NI veterans in this current study.

NI veterans are cognisant that the threat to life remains real for both ex-Service personnel and security forces in NI, because while the Irish Republican Army and other paramilitary organisations announced they were ending their 'armed campaign' in 2005, dissident republicans continue to use violence against the Security Forces (BBC, 2016; Bradley, 2018). Because of this, NI veterans remain very security conscious and are very reluctant to reveal their military service to strangers. Given that leadership can have real impact by improving resilience through cohesion, support and solidarity (Bleich, 2017), it is a very legitimate argument that veterans may feel more confident and supported, and less abandoned, if there is visible, strong leadership at the highest levels of government. A veterans' champion in the NI government and support from all political parties could manage

public perceptions and begin to address the lack of knowledge and biased opinions of civilian employers towards veterans and also push for more psychological health and trauma support.

Conclusion

NI has come a long way and is moving towards peace and equality, with a power-sharing legislative assembly in existence and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) which had been seen as a Protestant police force, as of 2018, has Catholic recruitment standing at around 32%. Unfortunately, dissident paramilitary organisations continue to attack and threaten security forces, politicians and civilians. In the devolved government in NI, half of the seats are held by Nationalists, many of whom would protest at any attempt to provide ex-Services personnel with additional support that is over and above what any other NI citizen can avail themselves of. Second, the security threat is real and this makes veterans very reluctant to come forward for help, as they feel they cannot freely and openly approach potential employers to find employment. Many military personnel transition easily (Morin, 2011), but for those who may struggle in NI, stress is being increased by the lack of tailored and comprehensive support services, and the existence of personal security threats and 'no-go' areas because of ongoing dissident republican activity (BBC, 2016).

Veterans across the world experience barriers to employment when entering civilian life. Such barriers may be less onerous if they are able to connect quickly to a network of support from other veterans (Keeling et al, 2018). The reality is, that the political landscape needs to change much further in NI in order for all veterans, especially the most vulnerable, to feel safe enough to seek out the help of others, and in time, enjoy financial and social well-being. Veterans are a cohort of our population that would benefit greatly from more visible leadership and backing from the government to ensure they feel safer, valued and supported. What may help in this regard is if the four nations of UK re-affirm, and make explicit, the social and psychological contract they entered into with the members of their Armed Forces,

and acknowledges and honours their obligation to support serving and ex-serving personnel alike. To this end, previously made recommendations (SSAFA, 2018) about the need to significantly invest into improving employment support for Armed Forces veterans should be taken into account, and current understanding of transition and transition support services, re-conceptualised, re-evaluated and improved.

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